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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 000649

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: NEW RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS MINISTER FOCUSES ON DIALOGUE
AND TOLERANCE

REF: 05 SANAA 3560

Classified By: AMBASSADOR THOMAS C. KRAJESKI, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Newly appointed Minister of Awqaf (Endowment) and Religious Guidance, Judge Hamoud al-Hitar, told Ambassador on April 11 that he wants to institute a "national strategy" for religious dialogue. Hitar offered suggestions for further cooperation between post and the ministry, including sending ministry officials on the International Visitors program and instituting round-table discussions with American Muslims. Hitar said that he is no longer involved in any reconciliation efforts with the al-Houthi insurrectionists in Saada, but expressed hope for a dialogue with less extreme al-Houthis in the future. The Minister also confirmed that he was not in any direct contact with the returned Guantanamo detainees, but that he plans to initiate a dialogue with them in the near future. END SUMMARY

Continued Cooperation

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12. (C) The Ambassador opened the meeting by congratulating the Minister on his new appointment and said it was a positive sign for Yemen. The Minister explained that he intends to use his new position to create a "national strategy for guidance based on the Qur'an, Sunna, and Constitution" to promote dialogue. His aims while at the ministry are to "deepen unity," increase "loyalty to the Ummah," and "promote tolerance." (NOTE: "Sunna" are the ways and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed, used as an example to the Muslim "Ummah," which is the community of Muslims around the world. END NOTE)

13. (C) The Minister said he benefited greatly from a trip to the United States in 2005 sponsored by the International Visitor program on Inter-faith Dialogue. He explained to the Ambassador that the religious coexistence in the United States is an inspiration, and he aspires for the same in Yemen. He also praised American patriotism, specifically mentioning American Muslims, in that they label themselves as American before all else. Ambassador said post would like to send more individuals from the ministry on the same IV program, and passed nomination forms to Hitar. The Ambassador also suggested establishing dialogue between American Muslim leaders and other religious groups with Yemeni Muslims, by working with the Ministry. Hitar expressed support for these ideas, and agreed that dialogue would be mutually beneficial.

Saada

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14. (C) Asked for his views on the conflict in Saada, the Minister said he is not involved in any reconciliation efforts with the al-Houthis, but expressed the possibility of entering a dialogue with what he characterized as the "50 percent that have already accepted dialogue," as opposed to the other half of al-Houthi followers he believes to be too extreme. (NOTE: In the 2004 Saada uprising, the Minister headed the Government Dialogue Committee and has been personally affected by the conflict; his brother, Lt. Col. al-Hitar, was killed in August 2004. END NOTE)

GTMO RETURNEES

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15. (C) Turning to the subject of the returned Yemeni detainees from Guantanamo Bay, the Minister said that he does not currently have a dialogue with them, but expressed the desire for one. He explained that dialogue has a "positive mental effect" on people, and that it gives them a chance to diffuse their anger. The Minister said that the possibility of opening a communication with the returnees is under consideration within the government.

COMMENT

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16. (C) COMMENT: Judge Hitar's star continues to shine in Yemen. As head of the Government's efforts to dialogue with extremists in an effort to "de-program" them, Hitar earned a reputation for being a straightforward religious scholar. Using only the Qu'ran (and not alleged sayings of the Prophet or the exegesis of other religious scholars), Hitar claimed never to have lost a debate with an extremist, and says that his program was "90 percent effective" in showing extremists

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the "straight path" of tolerance and peace (reftel). Observers differ on the effectiveness of Hitar's dialogue program, but all agree that he is a fervent believer in religious tolerance and moderation -- very welcome qualities for a newly appointed Minister of Religious Affairs in Yemen.

KRAJESKI